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A pursuit of ontological truth in Aristotle's philosophy

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Chapter Seven

Conclusion

1. The route of my journey

The conception of truth is an important topic in the history of philosophy. The issues concerning truth involve language, thought, and ontology, as well as the correspondence relations between them. Among various interpretations of truth, the correspondence theory of truth is supported by many scholars, such as David Armstrong, Michael Devitt, and many others. Michael Devitt and Wolfgang Künne attribute the correspondence theory of truth to Aristotle's philosophy, citing in particular *Metaphysics* Γ.7, Δ.7, E.4, and Θ.10. Accordingly, they accept the correspondence relation between statements and things. This correspondence interpretation of truth is usually regarded as the Standard Account of truth in Aristotle. However, based on Aristotle's work, how to interpret the concept of truth is still open to interpretation.

My journey into the concept of truth started from the contemporary discussion of the classic correspondence theory of truth, but I have been directly inspired by Aristotle, who spent all his life exploring the truth as the task of philosophers by means of revealing the inherent connection between truth and being. From Aristotle's works the project of seeking an ontological reading of truth has emerged.

In chapter Two, I introduced the notion of truth as being on the basis of an analysis of *Metaphysics* Θ.10 where Aristotle himself sets forth truth as being in the strictest sense. Similarly, just as what has been concluded in the end of *Metaphysics* α.1:

T85: It is right also that philosophy should be called knowledge of the truth. For the end of theoretical knowledge is truth, while that of practical knowledge is action (for even if they consider how things are, practical men do not study what is eternal but what stands in some relation at some time). Now we do not know a truth without its cause; and a thing has a quality in a higher degree than other things if in virtue of it the similar quality belongs to the other things (e.g. fire is the hottest of things; for it is the cause of the heat of all other things); so that that which causes derivative truths to be true is most true. Therefore the principles of eternal things must be always most true; for they are not merely sometimes true, nor is there any cause of their being, but they themselves are the cause of the being of other things, so that as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth. (*Met.* α.1, 993b20-993b30 = T41)

If each thing is in respect of being, as it is in respect of truth, then my ontological reading of truth as being in the strictest sense in *Metaphysics* Θ.10 will be on point. According to *Metaphysics* Θ.10, in the first place, Aristotle accepts the fact that being can be said in

several ways. Aristotle has listed these ways by describing being in terms of the categories, of actualization & potentiality, as well as being in the strictest sense as truth. Importantly, it is noticeable that Aristotle has applied the term of truth and false to describe being and non-being in the strictest sense. Here, truth takes the shape of being that is being in the strictest sense. In order to make the inherent relation between truth and being clearer, Aristotle underlines the concept of combinations and separations of being constituting the fundamental elements of truth and falsity by means of introducing incomposites, composites, and things that cannot be separated. Among these modes of being, truth in incomposites has been clarified by scrutinizing incomposites as simple bodies, eternal beings, essences and forms without matter. Truth in composites, on the other hand, has been found in essences of composites specified in terms of matter and form, or potentiality and actuality.

Within the hierarchy of truth established in chapter Three, the ontological independence and the ontological priority of substances have been established by comparing them with statements with truth-values at the language level, and thoughts with truth-values at the psychological level. If we succeed in understanding the ontological truth—that is truth as being in the strictest sense—it will not merely be in its pure form, but also by looking for the ontological truth at the intersection of various dimensions of being. The nature of ontological truth, that is truth as being in the strictest sense, in Aristotle can be clarified by the exploration of what is fundamental among the categories, viz. the simple things expressed by categories without contraries as essences, as well as actuality and potentiality. From this we arrive at a hierarchy of beings.

In the *Categories*, we found what is fundamental in being in reference to categories . Aristotle claims that categories without contraries are more fundamental than assertions consisting of combinations of categories. Among various single categories that have been divided into ten kinds, substance is the fundamental one. Therefore, these simple categories without combinations can be divided into main two groups in which the fundamental one consists of the primary substances, while the other group contains the remaining categories that could be indicated by being “Said of” or “Said in” primary substances on which they depend.

Next, within the framework of being in terms of actuality and potentiality, what is fundamental in actuality and potentiality has been manifested by the distinction between first eternal being and perishable beings. The first eternal being is always in actuality without potentiality, thus the first eternal being is always ontologically prior; it functions as the final cause for both eternal and perishable beings.

Within the understanding of the hierarchy of beings, Aristotle has suggested the essences as the object of immediate definitions that function as the first principles of demonstrations because they guarantee the truth and certainty of demonstrations. Based on the relation between essences and demonstrations, demonstrative knowledge as products of demonstrations must be true all the time. At the same time, the indemonstrable knowledge has to be true forever, since axioms serve as the starting-point of all other principles. The principle of non-contradiction would be taken as one example of these axioms. The principle

of non-contradiction as truth in things must always be true so as to make statements true. In this regard, the principle of non-contradiction could be treated as ‘a principle in things as the truth’ that is prior to and beyond the scope of human knowledge.

I fully appreciate what the correspondence theory of truth normally aims to express in terms of truth-bearers and truth-makers. My criticism concerns the suggestion that things are merely truth-makers that make statements true. In my view, Aristotle holds that things themselves are true. I have called this ontological truth. Moreover, the ontological reading of truth as being in the strictest sense has revealed concrete beings, instead of merely expressing the truth-value of statements.

In this dissertation, I deliberately took a generic approach to a large number of fundamental texts from Aristotle's oeuvre. My goal was to create a new framework in which the coherence of Aristotle's texts on being and truth can be seen more clearly than in the received interpretations. Of course, all these fundamental texts have been commented on extensively, from antiquity to the present. Although I have tried to do some justice to the most important modern literature, I have not been able to address the myriad issues of detail discussed in the literature. Further substantiation of my new framework by means of a more detailed defense against modern alternatives will be a task for future research.

2. The goal of my journey

At the beginning of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle explicitly states that all human beings by nature desire to know. And in the opening chapter of *Physics*,²⁹⁷ for instance, it is said that scientific inquiry starts from what is most familiar or best known to us about some subject and proceeds to find what is best known absolutely or by nature in the form of principles and causes which explain what was previously best known to us.²⁹⁸ Then, the route of inquiry is revealed from what is familiar to us to what is known by nature. If we take truth as truth-values as what is most familiar to us, then the ontological truth that we are looking for comes out as the best known absolutely or by nature.

According to the route of knowing for human beings, and appealing to the statement mentioned before that what is known by nature is being itself, then, I am going to argue that the end of human beings is seeking ontological truth. What is more, the direction and end of the behavior of knowing have been determined by the ability and the limitation of the ability of human beings.

T86: On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. And its life is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time. For it is ever in this state (which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And therefore waking, perception, and thinking are most pleasant, and hopes and memories are so because of their reference to these.) And thought in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it

²⁹⁷ *Phys.* I.1, 184a16.

²⁹⁸ Bolton, 1996, 231-280.

becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance, is thought. And it is active when it possesses this object. Therefore the latter rather than the former is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God is in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's essential actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God. (*Met.* Λ.7, 1072b31-1073a2; cf T62)

In the first place, considering specific limitations of human beings that are perishable ultimately,²⁹⁹ as human beings, the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best, and the best life we can enjoy is just a short time. Similarly, we only can seek ontological truth, rather than achieving it and keeping it. In this case, as human beings, we only keep the activity of seeking ontological truth instead of achieving this pursuit, since we cannot be in the state of activity forever as God can do. That is the direct reason why I am arguing now that seeking ontological truth is the aim for human beings, rather than possessing it or keeping it.

Secondly, if Aristotle proposes that we as human beings are trying to capture truth in nature by acquiring knowledge, and if philosophy for Aristotle is the scientific knowledge of the truth, then the end of the theoretical science is truth. In this case, I am proposing that seeking ontological truth is the end for human beings, which also could be viewed as an excellence of the performance of the function of human beings. From the fundamental role of contemplation among the functions of human beings,³⁰⁰ Aristotle believes we can know that those ends are ultimately ordered by the final end of contemplation. Since contemplation has the whole of nature as its object, so his recognition of the ultimate subordination of practical to theoretical knowledge and contemplation is the correct basis for appreciating how our fulfillment as human beings involves contemplation of the world around us.³⁰¹ At the same time this position respects the priority of the actuality of various modes of being as ontological truth by the way of desiring and seeking. It is worth recognizing that the pursuit of ontological truth by us is not the actuality of truth by nature. The content of ontological truth is being in the strictest sense, which has been indicated by the ontological priority of actuality of various modes of being.

Furthermore, the relation between ontological truth and human beings is based on the inherent relation between excellence and happiness: the happiest activity for human beings is contemplation.³⁰² The pursuit of ontological truth, or as Aristotle says, contemplating truth is

²⁹⁹ Except that, limitations of human beings are observed in *NE.* X.8, 1179a33-1863, 1175a10-1857, 1179a33-1863.

³⁰⁰ *NE.* X.8, 1179a1-1179a9.

³⁰¹ Johnson, 2005, 360.

³⁰² *NE.* X.7, 1177a18-1177a20.

viewed as an activity of pleasure for human beings.³⁰³ However, based on the limitations of mortals, our happiness in contemplation is discontinuous and not self-sufficient.³⁰⁴ In this sense mortals are only seeking ontological truth in various modes of being, rather than completely achieving it and keeping it. But this limitation on the pursuit of ontological truth still provides a space for pleasure and excellence of human beings. Thus, to complete ourselves to the best of our ability as human beings, I would like to take the activity of seeking ontological truth as a possible way to understand Aristotle's philosophical work as a pleasure.

In this way, I am trying to let Aristotle himself speak clearly in light of seeking ontological truth, just as Aristotle is trying to let things say the things themselves. Therefore, seeking ontological truth is not only an actualization of the excellence of human beings but also a full performance of excellence of being itself. In this sense, the endless pursuit of truth is the highest mode of actuality of being for human beings. The conclusion of my whole project would be that Aristotle's work constitutes the activity of a pursuit of ontological truth in nature, which is also a performance of human beings' excellence specifically carried out by Aristotle himself in his own personal way. In this case, Aristotle's personal search for truth and approach to being is placed in a fruitful interaction with his account of impersonal, transcendental activity of philosophical contemplation.

³⁰³ *NE*. X.7, 1177a18-1177a20. If happiness is activity in accordance with excellence, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest excellence; and this will be that of the best thing in us.

³⁰⁴ The self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others. For instance, *NE*. I.7, 1097b7-1097b22.